

The Michigan Daily

Retrain and retain

State legislature needs to focus on workers, young and old

By Daily Editorial Staff on 3/31/08

With the Big Three on the run and few prospects looking to fill the void, Michigan's economy is in shambles. Lacking specialized knowledge and skills, Michigan's former autoworkers are taking the biggest hit. Enter the No Worker Left Behind program. Thankfully, Michigan's House of Representatives recently voted to expand this initiative, which offers at least a partial solution to the state's economic woes by training displaced workers for jobs in high-tech industries. What Michigan's legislature still hasn't realized is that the real solution is here - at Michigan's state universities.

By the numbers, Michigan is in dire economic straits. While the rest of the country is just getting introduced to a recession, Michigan has been leading the way for years. The state's unemployment rate in February was 7.2 percent - an astonishing 2.4 percent above the national unemployment rate of 4.8 percent. But buried in all the bad news, there is a statistic that offers a way to fix Michigan: Only 4 percent of the state's college graduates are unemployed.

While it might seem obvious, that's a big difference. Gov. Jennifer Granholm and the state legislature recognized this difference last year when they created the No Worker Left Behind program. The project operates on a simple concept: displaced workers - laid off by industries closing up shop - receive free tuition at community colleges so they can train for new jobs in fast-growing fields. In its second year, the program already has 20,000 individuals enrolled, with another 11,000 on the waitlist. Earlier this month, the state House voted to provide another \$40 million to support the expansion of this popular initiative and move these people off of waitlists and into training.

The expansion of NWLB is a recognition that Michigan's unemployed adults can't just wait around until their jobs come back. Growing industries in areas like alternative energy and medicine are out there - they just aren't here. This program is a way to attract those industries to Michigan. More importantly, the overall benefits are kept in the state even though the program is largely funded by federal grants. This makes it relatively inexpensive for the state - a perfect combination.

Teaching old dogs new tricks is necessary, but the state legislature shouldn't forget that it won't be sufficient to fix Michigan. College students are fleeing the state the second they get their degrees - largely because the state hasn't offered them a reason to stay. It isn't offering much financial aid to help students get through college. And once students graduate, it isn't offering them many jobs or support if they want to be entrepreneurs. Yet, keeping us around may mean the difference between a prosperous Michigan and another decade of economic disaster.

If the state wants to keep its students here, it will have to put its money where its mouth is. There is still no substitute for adequate university funding. Creating jobs for students to move into when they graduate isn't easy. And innovative entrepreneurship programs don't come cheap.

Thankfully, the NWLB hopes to tackle the problems left in the wake of Michigan's old economy. But Michigan still hasn't found a way to develop its new economy. To do that, it needs to start young.